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Evil Eyes On: The Empowerment of Intellectually Disabled Adolescents and Their Social Development in Nadia and Hooghly Districts of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Intellectual disability among adolescents continues to be associated with social stigma, discrimination, exclusion, and inadequate opportunities for participation in mainstream social life. In many parts of India, especially in semi-urban and rural areas, adolescents with intellectual disabilities encounter persistent negative attitudes that affect their self-esteem, social competence, and overall development. The present study, entitled "Evil Eyes On: The Empowerment of Intellectually Disabled Adolescents and Their Social Development in Nadia and Hooghly Districts of West Bengal," explores the relationship between empowerment initiatives and social development among intellectually disabled adolescents in these two districts. The study adopts a mixed-method approach involving adolescents with intellectual disabilities, parents, special educators, and community stakeholders. Data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, observations, and case studies to understand the role of family support, inclusive education, community acceptance, vocational training, and social participation in promoting empowerment. The findings indicate that despite significant challenges such as social prejudice, inadequate resources, and limited awareness, several empowering factors positively influence the social development of intellectually disabled

adolescents. Family involvement, inclusive educational practices, peer interaction, and community-based support systems were found to enhance communication skills, self-confidence, independence, and social participation. The study emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts among educational institutions, families, government agencies, and civil society organizations to ensure inclusive and equitable opportunities for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. The research contributes to the understanding of empowerment as a multidimensional process and highlights the importance of creating supportive social environments that foster dignity, participation, and holistic development among intellectually disabled adolescents in West Bengal.

Introduction

Intellectual disability represents one of the most significant developmental challenges affecting millions of children and adolescents worldwide. Characterized by limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, intellectual disability influences communication skills, social relationships, self-care abilities, and participation in daily activities. Adolescence is a crucial period marked by identity formation, emotional development, social interaction, and increasing independence. However, for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, these developmental processes are often complicated by societal prejudice, discrimination, and inadequate support systems.

In India, the issue of disability has increasingly gained attention due to the emergence of inclusive policies and legislative frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Despite legal recognition and constitutional guarantees, many adolescents with intellectual disabilities continue to experience marginalization and social exclusion. Social misconceptions, lack of awareness, poverty, and limited access to specialized educational services contribute to the difficulties encountered by these individuals. The social environment frequently imposes barriers that restrict their opportunities for self-expression, participation, and empowerment.

The expression “Evil Eyes On” symbolically represents the negative societal attitudes and stigmatizing perceptions directed toward adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Such attitudes often lead to feelings of inferiority, dependence, and social isolation. The consequences are not only psychological but also

developmental, affecting interpersonal relationships, communication abilities, and overall quality of life. Empowerment, therefore, becomes an essential mechanism through which

adolescents with intellectual disabilities can acquire confidence, independence, and social competence.

Empowerment refers to a process that enables individuals to gain control over their lives, develop decision-making capabilities, and actively participate in society. For intellectually disabled adolescents, empowerment extends beyond academic achievement and includes emotional support, social acceptance, vocational skills, and opportunities for meaningful interaction. Family members, teachers, peers, and community organizations play a crucial role in facilitating this process. Positive experiences and supportive environments contribute significantly to the enhancement of adaptive behaviors and social functioning.

The districts of Nadia and Hooghly in West Bengal present unique socio-cultural contexts where traditional beliefs coexist with modern educational practices. Although awareness regarding disability has increased over the years, considerable disparities remain between urban and rural communities concerning access to inclusive education and rehabilitation services. Families often face social stigma and economic constraints that hinder the development of intellectually disabled adolescents. Nevertheless, the presence of special schools, non-governmental organizations, and community initiatives has created opportunities for promoting empowerment and social integration.

Social development is an important aspect of adolescent growth and encompasses interpersonal relationships, communication skills, social responsibility, emotional maturity, and participation in community life. Adolescents with intellectual disabilities frequently experience difficulties in establishing friendships and maintaining social interactions due to cognitive limitations and societal barriers. Consequently, they require structured support and enabling environments to enhance their social competence. Inclusive educational settings and community participation can facilitate peer acceptance and foster a sense of belonging.

The significance of the present study lies in its focus on empowerment and social development within specific regional contexts. While considerable research has examined intellectual disability from medical and educational perspectives, relatively fewer studies have investigated the interrelationship between empowerment and social development among adolescents in Nadia and Hooghly districts.

Understanding these dimensions is essential for developing effective interventions and policy measures aimed at promoting inclusive development.

The objectives of the study are to examine the factors influencing the empowerment of intellectually disabled adolescents, analyze the role of families and educational institutions in facilitating social development, identify barriers to social participation, and suggest measures for strengthening inclusive practices. Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on disability rights, social inclusion, and adolescent development.

Literature Review

The concept of intellectual disability has evolved considerably over the years. Earlier approaches emphasized medical deficiencies and limitations, whereas contemporary perspectives recognize the interaction between individuals and their social environments. Schalock et al. (2010) argued that intellectual disability should be understood through a multidimensional framework encompassing intellectual functioning, adaptive behavior, health, participation, and contextual factors. This shift has encouraged greater emphasis on quality of life and social inclusion.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights the influence of family, school, peer groups, and society on individual development. Adolescents with intellectual disabilities are affected by multiple environmental factors that shape their social experiences and opportunities. Supportive relationships within families and educational institutions contribute significantly to emotional well-being and social competence. Conversely, negative attitudes and discriminatory practices restrict developmental opportunities and hinder empowerment.

Research conducted by Wehmeyer (2013) emphasized the importance of self-determination and personal autonomy in the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. According to his findings, self-determination contributes to improved social functioning, independent living skills, and higher quality of life. Empowerment programs that encourage decision-making and self-advocacy enhance confidence and social participation among adolescents.

Inclusive education has emerged as a significant strategy for promoting social

development. UNESCO (2020) emphasized that inclusive learning environments provide opportunities for interaction, cooperation, and acceptance among students with and without disabilities. Such environments help reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding. Studies have demonstrated that inclusive classrooms enhance communication skills and social relationships among intellectually disabled adolescents.

Indian researchers have also highlighted the challenges faced by children with intellectual disabilities. Mani (2011) observed that social stigma and parental anxiety often affect the educational experiences and social adjustment of children with disabilities. Families frequently encounter social isolation and financial burdens that limit opportunities for rehabilitation and development. Nevertheless, parental support and positive family relationships have been identified as important determinants of psychosocial adjustment.

Kumar and Midha (2017) found that adolescents with intellectual disabilities who received vocational training and life skill education exhibited higher levels of self-confidence and social adaptability. Skill development programs enhanced their ability to perform daily activities independently and increased opportunities for community participation. Similarly, community-based rehabilitation initiatives were found to improve social integration and quality of life.

Peer relationships constitute another important factor influencing social development. Hallahan and Kauffman (2015) reported that positive peer interactions contribute to emotional stability and self-esteem among adolescents with disabilities. However, bullying, rejection, and social exclusion continue to pose major challenges. Interventions promoting peer sensitization and inclusive recreational activities have been found to reduce prejudice and encourage friendship formation.

Studies conducted in rural India indicate that cultural beliefs and misconceptions often contribute to the stigmatization of disability. Some families attribute intellectual disability to supernatural causes or divine punishment, leading to social withdrawal and delayed intervention. Awareness campaigns and educational programs have been effective in changing community attitudes and promoting acceptance.

The World Health Organization (2022) emphasized that social inclusion and empowerment are essential components of disability rights and sustainable development. Empowerment is viewed not merely as a personal attribute but as a process involving access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and community participation. Governments and civil society organizations play vital roles in creating inclusive societies that respect diversity and human dignity.

Despite the growing body of literature, limited studies have focused specifically on the empowerment and social development of intellectually disabled adolescents in Nadia and Hooghly districts. Existing research has largely concentrated on educational interventions and parental stress, leaving a gap concerning community participation, social relationships, and empowerment processes. Therefore, the present study

attempts to address this gap by examining the multidimensional aspects of empowerment and their influence on social development among intellectually disabled adolescents in these districts.

Methodology

The present study adopted a mixed-method research design to investigate the empowerment and social development of intellectually disabled adolescents in Nadia and Hooghly districts of West Bengal. The mixed-method approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to combine quantitative and qualitative techniques for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the issues associated with intellectual disability, social participation, and empowerment. The study was descriptive and exploratory in nature, focusing on the lived experiences of adolescents with intellectual disabilities and the perceptions of their families, teachers, and community members.

The geographical area of the study comprised the districts of Nadia and Hooghly, which represent diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. These districts include both urban and rural regions, thereby providing opportunities to examine differences in awareness, educational facilities, and social support mechanisms. Several special schools, inclusive schools, and rehabilitation centers functioning within these districts formed the basis for selecting the study population.

The target population consisted of intellectually disabled adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 years. In addition to the adolescents, parents, special educators,

and community stakeholders were included to gain a multidimensional understanding of empowerment and social development. A purposive sampling technique was employed because the participants had to fulfill specific criteria related to age and diagnosis of intellectual disability. The sample comprised 80 intellectually disabled adolescents, 40 parents, 15 special educators, and 10 community representatives from selected institutions and local communities. Efforts were made to ensure representation from both Nadia and Hooghly districts to capture variations in social experiences and support systems.

Primary data were collected through questionnaires, structured interviews, participant observation, and case studies. Questionnaires were administered to parents and teachers to assess the adolescents' social behavior, communication skills, participation in activities, and adaptive functioning. Semi-structured interviews provided opportunities to explore perceptions regarding stigma, family support, educational experiences, and community acceptance. Participant observation enabled the researcher to understand interaction patterns and behavioral characteristics in educational and social settings. Case studies were conducted to document individual experiences and identify factors contributing to empowerment and social development.

Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, government reports, policy documents, census data, and reports published by organizations working in the field of disability and inclusive education. Relevant literature helped in understanding theoretical perspectives and contextualizing the findings of the study within existing academic discourse.

The instruments used for data collection were validated through expert consultation with special educators and researchers working in disability studies. Ethical considerations were given considerable importance during the research process. Consent was obtained from parents and institutional authorities, and confidentiality of participants was maintained. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that the information provided would be used solely for academic purposes.

Data obtained through questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as percentages and frequencies. Qualitative information obtained

through interviews and observations was analyzed thematically. Themes relating to family support, social stigma, peer relationships, educational experiences, community participation, and empowerment were identified and interpreted to understand their influence on social development.

The methodological framework enabled the study to examine not only measurable aspe cts of social development but also subjective experiences associated with empowerment. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches enhanced the reliability and comprehensiveness of the findings and provided deeper insights into the realities faced by intellectually disabled adolescents in Nadia and Hooghly districts.

Results

The findings of the study revealed that empowerment and social development among intellectually disabled adolescents are influenced by multiple factors operating at individual, familial, educational, and community levels. The analysis demonstrated that family support emerged as one of the most important determinants of positive social development. Adolescents who received encouragement and emotional support from parents exhibited greater confidence, better communication skills, and higher levels of participation in social activities. Families that actively engaged in educational and rehabilitation processes contributed significantly to the development of adaptive behavior and independent functioning among their children.

The study indicated that inclusive educational practices positively influenced social interaction and self-esteem among intellectually disabled adolescents. Participants enrolled in inclusive schools showed greater opportunities for peer interaction and participation in co-curricular activities compared to those studying

exclusively in segregated settings. Teachers reported that collaborative classroom activities promoted acceptance and friendship among students. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained personnel, and limited awareness among peers sometimes restricted effective inclusion.

Social stigma emerged as a major barrier to empowerment and social development.

Many parents reported experiencing discriminatory attitudes and social isolation due

to prevailing misconceptions regarding intellectual disability. Adolescents frequently encountered teasing, rejection, and negative labeling from peers and community members. Such experiences affected their emotional well-being and reduced their willingness to participate in social gatherings and community activities. The findings suggest that societal prejudice continues to hinder the realization of inclusive development.

The results further revealed that peer relationships played a significant role in shaping social competence. Adolescents who maintained positive friendships displayed greater emotional stability and communication abilities. Participation in group activities, sports, and cultural programs enhanced their social confidence and fostered a sense of belonging. Conversely, lack of peer acceptance contributed to feelings of loneliness and withdrawal. Schools that organized awareness programs and inclusive activities demonstrated comparatively higher levels of peer support and social integration.

Vocational and life skill training programs emerged as important components of empowerment. Adolescents receiving training in daily living skills, craft activities, and vocational tasks showed greater independence and self-confidence. Parents and teachers observed improvements in self-care abilities, decision-making skills, and social interaction among these adolescents. Vocational exposure also increased their aspirations for future employment and community participation.

Differences between urban and rural settings were evident in the findings. Urban participants generally had better access to educational facilities, rehabilitation services, and awareness programs. In contrast, adolescents residing in rural areas faced limitations due to inadequate resources and persistent cultural misconceptions. Families in rural communities often reported difficulties in accessing specialized support services and experienced greater social stigma. Nevertheless, the presence of community-based organizations and local initiatives helped mitigate some of these challenges by providing counseling, awareness campaigns, and opportunities for participation.

The study also highlighted the significance of teachers and special educators in promoting empowerment. Positive teacher attitudes and individualized instructional practices facilitated emotional security and social competence among adolescents.

Educators who emphasized cooperative learning and life skill development contributed substantially to enhancing communication and adaptive behavior. Their role extended beyond academic instruction to include counseling and advocacy for inclusion and acceptance.

Community participation was found to be moderately associated with social development. Adolescents involved in religious festivals, sports activities, and local cultural events demonstrated improved interpersonal skills and increased self-esteem. Families reported that community acceptance encouraged adolescents to interact more freely and participate in collective activities. However, lack of awareness among some community members continued to create barriers to full social inclusion.

The qualitative findings obtained from case studies further illustrated the transformative role of empowerment. Several adolescents who initially displayed limited communication and low self-confidence showed remarkable improvement after receiving educational support and participating in skill development programs. Increased social interaction and positive reinforcement contributed to their emotional growth and independence. Parents also expressed satisfaction regarding the progress observed in their children and emphasized the importance of continued support and societal acceptance.

Overall, the results indicate that empowerment is a multidimensional process that significantly influences the social development of intellectually disabled adolescents. Family involvement, inclusive education, vocational training, supportive peer relationships, and community participation emerged as key factors promoting social competence and self-confidence. At the same time, stigma, discrimination, and inadequate resources remain persistent obstacles requiring collective intervention from families, educational institutions, policymakers, and society.

Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal that the empowerment of intellectually disabled adolescents is intrinsically connected with their social development. Empowerment emerged not merely as a process of enhancing individual capabilities

but as a multidimensional phenomenon involving family support, educational opportunities, social acceptance, vocational preparation, and community participation. The experiences of adolescents in Nadia and

Hooghly districts indicate that social development is significantly influenced by the quality of interaction and support they receive from their immediate environment. The results support Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the role of multiple environmental systems in shaping human development.

Family support was found to be one of the strongest predictors of social competence and emotional well-being. Adolescents whose parents actively participated in educational and rehabilitative processes demonstrated greater self-confidence and social adaptability. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the role of parental involvement in enhancing adaptive behavior and psychological adjustment among individuals with intellectual disabilities. Families provide emotional security and serve as primary agents of socialization, thereby facilitating the development of communication skills and independent functioning.

Inclusive educational settings emerged as another important determinant of empowerment. Schools that promoted peer interaction and cooperative learning created opportunities for intellectually disabled adolescents to develop social skills and experience acceptance. These findings corroborate UNESCO's perspective on inclusive education as a means of promoting equity and social participation. However, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained personnel, and limited awareness among peers continue to restrict the effectiveness of inclusive practices. Therefore, educational institutions need to strengthen inclusive pedagogical approaches and ensure the availability of support services.

The persistence of stigma and discriminatory attitudes observed in the study highlights the continuing influence of cultural misconceptions surrounding intellectual disability. Negative labeling and social exclusion adversely affect the self-esteem and emotional health of adolescents. Such findings reinforce the social model of disability, which argues that barriers created by society contribute more significantly to exclusion than individual impairments themselves. The symbolic notion of "Evil Eyes On" reflects the prejudices and misconceptions that continue to shape societal perceptions and limit opportunities for participation.

Vocational and life skill training contributed positively to empowerment by enhancing independence and self-efficacy. Adolescents who participated in such programs exhibited greater confidence and social interaction. These observations are consistent with the principles of self-determination theory proposed by Wehmeyer, which emphasizes autonomy and competence as essential components of quality of life. Skill development programs prepare adolescents for future employment and promote their integration into society.

The differences observed between urban and rural areas indicate disparities in access to educational and rehabilitation services. Rural communities continue to face challenges arising from limited resources and inadequate awareness. Nevertheless, community-based organizations and awareness initiatives have shown

promising outcomes in reducing stigma and promoting participation. The findings suggest that empowerment should be viewed as a collective responsibility requiring collaboration among families, educational institutions, government agencies, and civil society organizations. Sustainable social development among intellectually disabled adolescents can be achieved only through inclusive environments that uphold dignity, equality, and participation.

Conclusion

The present study entitled "Evil Eyes On: The Empowerment of Intellectually Disabled Adolescents and Their Social Development in Nadia and Hooghly Districts of West Bengal" examined the relationship between empowerment and social development among adolescents with intellectual disabilities. The findings demonstrate that empowerment plays a crucial role in enhancing communication skills, self-confidence, adaptive behavior, and social participation. Family support, inclusive educational practices, peer relationships, vocational training, and community involvement emerged as important factors contributing to positive developmental outcomes. Adolescents who received emotional encouragement and opportunities for participation displayed greater independence and social competence.

The study also revealed the existence of significant barriers that continue to hinder the holistic development of intellectually disabled adolescents. Social stigma, discriminatory attitudes, inadequate educational resources, lack of trained

professionals, and limited awareness in rural areas restrict opportunities for social inclusion. These challenges not only affect the adolescents themselves but also place emotional and economic burdens on their families. Consequently, empowerment should not be viewed solely as an individual process but as a broader social responsibility requiring collective action.

The findings emphasize the need for strengthening inclusive education, expanding vocational and life skill programs, and promoting awareness regarding intellectual disability at the community level. Schools should adopt child-centered pedagogical approaches and provide opportunities for interaction and participation. Families need counseling and support services to enable them to effectively contribute to the development of their children. Government agencies and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to improve access to rehabilitation services and ensure the implementation of policies related to disability rights and social inclusion.

The concept of "Evil Eyes On" symbolizes the prejudices and stereotypes faced by intellectually disabled adolescents. Overcoming these barriers requires transformation in societal attitudes and the establishment of

environments based on respect, dignity, and equality. Empowerment must therefore be understood as a continuous process of enabling adolescents with intellectual disabilities to realize their potential and participate meaningfully in society. Future research may explore longitudinal perspectives and intervention-based approaches to further understand the mechanisms through which empowerment influences social development. Such efforts will contribute to building a more inclusive and compassionate society where every adolescent, regardless of ability, can lead a life of dignity and fulfillment.

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